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# America's First Spymaster

*The Last Hero: Wild Bill Donovan.* By Anthony Cave Brown. 891 pages. Times Books. \$24.95.

A hero, like a fox or a bear, requires a lot of room to survive—which is why there were so many more heroes about when the world was young. Now that the world is overcrowded we almost never see one, or we tend to think of them as groups of faceless folk who have endured the most severe confinement. Our astronauts, for instance, our POW's and hostages: they have all played valiantly roles prescribed for them by others. When William J. Donovan died in 1959, Eisenhower called him "the last hero." He meant, of course, the old-style hero: the indomitable warrior who makes his own rules, who by sheer force of will carries the day until, when the battle is over, he is done in—not by the enemy but by his own side.

For those of young or failing memories, "Wild Bill" Donovan is remembered chiefly for inventing the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in World War II, thereby introducing America to the benefits of organized unconventional warfare. His biographer, an English journalist and the first writer to be given full access to Donovan's voluminous files, understandably devotes most of his mammoth volume to this part of his subject's career. But even with all this documentation, Anthony Cave Brown senses the elusiveness of his man: heroes are hard to grasp. Born a poor Catholic, Donovan married a wealthy socialite. In World War I, he proved the kind of officer that soldiers rightly fear: the commander who wins a Medal of Honor while losing an appalling number of men. In peace he became a prominent lawyer. During the Depression he earned the equivalent of \$4.5 million—and paid no taxes. He had an affair, which wounded him. Cave Brown notes these facts but makes no comment, doesn't name the woman; since Homer's day, writers have allowed heroes their little lapses.

**Distrust:** Before the war, Donovan went everywhere, met everyone, familiarized himself with British intelligence and persuaded Roosevelt that America needed a central intelligence agency to keep track of enemy intentions. Immediately he ran into opposition: Hoover saw him as a rival to the FBI; the military denied him access to their interception of German and Japanese codes; the British distrusted his security and anti-imperialistic attitudes. Donovan plunged ahead. He taught Washington that war

could be fought not only by brute force but by indirection. Within 30 months, working with little but Roosevelt's patronage, he created an elite corps of some 16,000 men and women dedicated to gathering intelligence behind enemy lines, to recruiting partisans and disaffected Axis officials, and to launching commando raids. Most important, he proved that a few fighters working in southern Europe and the Balkans could distract huge quantities of troops from both the Normandy and Russian fronts.

Cave Brown gives over the bulk of his

around for more. The result is a biography that belongs to the gee-whiz school of historiography; it somehow glances off its subject's hide. Lamely written and content too often not to know, it will never offend its author's benefactors or the World War II buffs who will properly devour it. "The Last Hero" does have a great deal to say—its many pages are packed with detailed information. Let's be grateful for what we have.

PETER S. PRESCOTT



Culver Pictures

Donovan (1942): A gee-whiz hero of the old school

book to a history of OSS operations in Europe. He tells scores of stories of successes and disasters, stories so fascinating that only the most crotchety reader could protest that the author's obligation to write a biography has somehow been mislaid. In Hungary, for instance, the OSS's negotiations for a separate peace resulted in a German invasion. In Yugoslavia, the whereabouts of Tito's headquarters may have been leaked to the Germans through the OSS. In the Vatican, an agent purporting to pass on Japanese conditions for surrender proved to be a fake. Still, as Donovan pointed out—uselessly, when Truman ordered the OSS disbanded—the failures didn't matter; the successes did. At a cost of very few casualties, OSS operations paralyzed large numbers of the enemy and secured information that saved uncounted Allied lives.

Cave Brown appears to have made as good use as a reporter can of the material given him, but he doesn't seem to have dug